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ABSTRACT

Arguing that remedial/developmental students' lack of exposure to the fine arts relegates them to a permanent underclass within the student body, this paper describes the use of poetry, music, and other materials drawn from the fine arts in a remedial writing class. After presenting a rationale for including artistic concerns in the developmental syllabus, the essay explains how the instructional goal of creating a writing/reading community is pursued in class: (1) students work in small groups, sharing every piece of writing throughout the process of development, from initial brainstorming and drafting, to editing and revision; (2) the teacher specifies the audience and purpose for each assignment to help students understand that writing involves discovery of new ideas and the clarification of ideas for the writer and the reader; (3) group discussions and writing assignments are based on the instructor's own poetry and a collection of poems either selected or written by the students; (4) a structured assignment encourages students to respond emotionally and intellectually to paintings; and (5) students use the compare and contrast rhetorical mode to analyze two different and probably unfamiliar musical selections. The course structure and assignments emphasize the instructor's role as "fellow experiencer" and "participant" rather than "expert," and interject an element of positive play that encourages a high level of commitment to the task and to self-discovery. Sample writing assignments based on poetry, paintings, and music are included. (EJV)

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FINE ARTS AND THE DEVELOPMENTAL STUDENT

Martha M. Vertreace
Kennedy-King College
1988

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PANEL PRESENTATION: THE FINE ARTS OF TEACHING

Fine Arts and the Developmental Student

Martha M. Vertreace
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That college students should experience the humanities is a truism. That many remedial/developmental (R/D) students never experience the fine arts in a classroom setting becomes norm. Such students, especially those who repeat English/reading courses several times, encounter an endless round of assignments in grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Instructors evaluate paragraphs and essays emphasizing such valid concerns as subject-verb agreement and pronoun reference, downplaying equally valid concerns of logical progression of ideas, subordination, and structure.

Since R/D students seldom respond to artistic creation in writing, they become a permanent underclass within the student body. Well aware that more advanced college students study such topics within English/reading classes, R/D students sense that the measure of their difference, and implied inferiority, is that they do not have such opportunities.

Teachers who make room in their syllabi for artistic concerns do so knowing that many of their colleagues disagree with such time spent, except for an occasional poem linked to a holiday or season. R/D students need buttressing in the basic skills, but endless drills and workbook exercises produce short-term gains for tests constructed similarly to such exercises, with little if any direct carry-over to written prose. Furthermore, such repetitive exer-

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cises imply that students learn grammar and the like in order to generate prose, rather than the idea that through guided writing, students learn to manipulate grammatical forms.

My primary aim in organizing instruction is to establish a writing/ reading community, which implies writers, readers, and audience. Students work in small groups, sharing every piece of writing throughout the process of developmental, from initial brainstorming and drafting, to editing and revision. To provide students an additional sense of the reader, I specify that audience and purpose of writing for each assignment. Thus, students realize that writing has two major thrusts: the discovery of new ideas, and the clarification of ideas for the writer and the reader.

I identify several goals, in using material drawn from fine arts:

-- to teach writing through topics generated by such material
-- to expose students to such material in a value-free setting
-- to increase students' self-confidence in responding to such material.

Last semester, I observed three humanities classes which Dr. Thomas Roby conducted at Kennedy-King College. He led his students to approach Claude Monet's painting, and by implication all painting, through the "seeing," "feeling," and "thinking" ear. When I saw the engaged and enthusiastic responses to Monet which Dr. Roby's approach encouraged, I decided to write a series of assignments based on visual

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arts, music, and poetry, using this framework as organizing principle. These sample assignments follow this discussion.

Poetry:

With R/D students, I approach fine arts as a "fellow experiencer," rather than as "expert." As a poet, I find that building assignments based on my poetry brings a dimension to class not afforded by simply photocopying poems of other writers. As a teacher who critiques student writing, I feel the need to acknowledge to students that such sharing is risky for anyone. I have also shared drafts of poems, not to dwell on them, but to show that writing is revision for all writers, not just for R/D students.

In addition to the individual writing assignments, the class participates once-a-month in a Great American Poetry Read-Out. For the first Read-Out, students submit poems which they write themselves or copy from a collection. Students who do not feel ready to actually write a poem can still participate at the same level as those who opt to write one. For subsequent Read-Outs, students bring their own poetry. I type and photocopy the poems, identify each as to author/submitter, and collate them. Each student gets a copy of the booklet. We sit in a circle, with students volunteering to read their work. For the first poems, students are shy about raising questions and making comments, so I lead the discussion with such questions as:

1. What do you like about the poem?
2. What does it say to you?
3. How does it relate to your experience?

After they experience the process, students themselves conduct the discussion, as I become a par-

ticipator, rather than leader. For many, this experience is the first in which everyone -- students, teacher, and tutor -- tosses writing into the common pot for scrutiny. Students tend to like each other's work, an affirming experience for the more reticent class members.

Writing assignments emerge from the collected poems, which become a student-generated text. By validating their own creations as legitimate sources of ideas for study, I hope to break down their resistance to new encounters through the arts, and to encourage confidence in written and oral responses.

Visual Arts:
I encourage students to respond to paintings, through both intellect and emotion, in the writing assignment. For these students, many of whom have never thought about painting beyond a superficial assessment of "I like it" or "I don't like it," I provide a structure for their written response. The goal is for students to experience the story and emotional content of the painting, and to write an adequate response. In addition to the requirements specified on the assignment sheet, I take the students to the library where they look up their artists in the encyclopedia, and incorporate interesting details about their lives in the letter the students write.

For the dialogue assignment, I group the students first, giving each group a postcard showing two people in dialogue. The group generates dialogue, then presents that dialogue to the class. Students then receive different postcards which they take home, to repeat the process individually.

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Music:
By comparing disparate musical selections, pieces which students probably have never heard, they learn to manipulate the comparison- contrast rhetorical mode. For this assignment, I use short selections taken from Celtic Harp, by Patrick Bell, and Music for Films, by Brian Eno. The first piece has a lilting, pastoral air; the second reminds my students of Twilight Zone. Working in groups, they create worlds which correspond to the music. The assignment focuses on sheer inventiveness and arrangement of details. Students enjoy competing with each other to see which group can create the most bizarre world.

In Research on Written Composition, Dr. George Hillocks notes that the writing young children do resembles play, as they write without fear of failure. Further studies show that, among successful professionals, the earliest experiences of their chosen fields occurred as play, without strictures that would come later. For writers, "positive play experiences in early attempts at writing are important to developing high-level commitment to the task."

The playful element in these assignments carries over as students are more willing to engage in rewriting and editing. Students make discoveries about themselves and their world which many never thought possible. One woman was thrilled to read that her understanding of a painting by Cezanne matched the encyclopedia account. Another student had an audience for his poetry for the first time.

These assignments use group composing to facilitate writing which students complete at home. Having experienced the process, students are more willing to try it on their own. Instructors can adapt these assignments to reflect increasing requirements as the semester unfolds. In addition, instructors of their disciplines can also use this material.

Great American Poetry Read-Out

Directions:

Select the poem which you liked best among those we have studied. Why did you like it? What ideas did the poem suggest to you: Did you understand everything in the poem? Would you have changed anything in the poem? Free-write about the poem for five minutes.

Select one of the following as a topic sentence:

I liked the poem called "_____" because_____.

-or-

The poem called "_____" made me remember a time when_____.

Complete the sentence as your topic sentence. Remember to indent as you write your paragraph. Include details which make your paragraph very clear. Your details could illustrate the topic sentence. They might help tell a story about the topic sentence. They might be an explanation of the topic sentence.

Supply a concluding sentence which summarizes your ideas. Your paragraph should contain eight to ten sentences when complete.

PROOFREAD CAREFULLY! Make sure that all your sentences are complete. Look up any words whose spellings are questionable to you.

Supply an interesting title.

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Martha M. Vertreace

Description

The poem "Trade Secrets" uses description as its method of development. The first five lines describes the process of weaving baskets. The poem then catalogues, or lists, the child's daydreams which occur as she tries to weave a basket:

What sounds surface?
What images suggest taste?
What does the reader see?
What smells are there?
What images suggest touch?

Think of a childhood memory which you can describe. **Focus on a simple experience, not an extended story. Remember, the emphasis is on description, not narration. The poem concentrates on one experience, that of a mother and child weaving.

Freewrite for about five minutes. Use the questions above to help suggest details. Let your ideas flow freely and rapidly, without trying to compose.

Write a two-paragraph essay, using description. As the writer, make the experience you select visible to the reader, who has not had the very same experience. Begin with a clear topic sentence, and end with a solid conclusion.

When you have completed writing, proofread and title your essay.

** It might be helpful to begin your paper with "I remember" followed by a specific action, as the poem does.

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Trade Secrets

I remember watching my mother weave
raffia and round cane, retted and obedient,
each stalk bent around a seed circle
looped with pale grasses, until the sides
climbed in playful scallops.
When my nubby fingers could not tease
a basket from her nimble reeds and straw --
one large loop, five small -- over and over again,
I'd lose count until the sides sagged
like willows into the Eastern Branch near home
where crows scavenged in the school yard's clover.
One large, five small -- and I'd lose count again
as wind sifted through the window sill,
paged the calendar from Washington's Funeral
Parlor, and from their squares shook numbers
which fell between garlic ropes and
strings of hot, green peppers ripening
near the stove, to the linoleum floor.
One large, five small; wild onions grew
among dandelions I harvested, a quarter a bag,
for our neighbor's wine' my fingers tore
through marble clay as blind moles groped
among white roots, thick stems, sawtoothed leaves.
The coins slipped through my fingers
like the creek an old priest said
flowed underneath our house.
One large five small one large five small.
At night we'd put away our work;
the shadows bred field rabbits flushed from their
warren by the dogs we kept.
And I'd lose count again.

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Writing Assignment: Definition

The poem "Riverboat" uses definition as a method of development. The poem uses connotation to explore the nature of prejudice. Although the word "prejudice" is never used, the meaning is clear.

Webster's New World Dictionary defines prejudice as: (1) a preconceived, usually unfavorable idea; (2) an opinion held in disregard of facts that contradict it, bias; (3) intolerance or hatred of other races. Which of the two definitions involves the reader more -- the poem's connotative definition or Webster's denotative definition?

Listed below are several words which can hold very personal meanings for most people. Choose one of the words for which you will write a personal definition:

home father mother enemy friend
life death war peace hope

First, freewrite for five minutes about the word. What personal feelings does it hold for you? What experiences/ideas/feelings does it suggest?

Look up the word in the dictionary. Begin your essay with that dictionary definition as contrast for your personal ideas. Write at least one page, using examples and details to illustrate your ideas. Your details should be so strong that, even without the word being named, the reader could guess it!

Be sure to title your paper and proofread it.

Riverboat

My father at eighteen or so
a waiter on the Mississippi
learned Cajun French
he unlearned at the university;
brought a steak back the second time
to a suited sir who then demanded
I want this steak black
as black as you are.
Quizzical -- too poor to dare allow
the seductive hurt to hear
that nothing in this voice meant
black is proud --
there would be time
and time enough
for that --
the steak went back a third time
and returned a cinder
escorted by a scared kid
unsure of what to feel
and a Cajun chef
who, knowing all the rules,
forced the man to eat
every mouthful.

Martha M. Vertreace

Reprinted from Second House from the Corner, Kennedy-King College, 1986.

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Writing Assignment: Process

In the poem "Number One Son," the child's desire to be as brave as her father leads her to imitate him, even eating a raw clam. The poem includes a recipe for raw clams, along with the process for eating them.

Essays using process as development fall into three styles:

1. "How to..." -- This group represents directions which are clearly given, step-by-step, so that readers can repeat the process. Recipes fall into this category, as well as directions to specific places.

2. "How...was done" -- This group describes how something unusual or complex was done. Readers should learn from such essays, but would not repeat the process. Essays explaining how the movie Star Trek was made or how Gone with the Wind was written are examples of this type.

3. "How...works" -- This group presents a complex, scientific process in ordinary language. A description of how the circulatory system in humans functions is an example of such an essay.

Think of a process which you know well and can describe without a lot of outside research. Focus on something very simple. Freewrite for five minutes, jotting down the steps and all the pertinent details.

Imagine that you are explaining that process to a ten-year-old. Write clearly and simply. A ten-year-old has a short attention span, so you must interest the child by presenting colorful details. Your introduction, one or two sentences, should state specifically what process you intend to describe. What makes that process interesting or important? Write one or two paragraphs, using adequate transitions. Use your conclusion to emphasize the importance of the process. When you have finished, proofread. Make sure that the steps follow logically. Give your paper an interesting title.

Number One Son

Nothing subtle about opening a clam --
stubborn sphincters hiding in the shell.
My father would cajole and wait, then drive
the clam knife home with a determined twist.
Nothing elegant either about eating one
the first time; fearing for all my life
a spindle-legged girl who would be
less a man than he was. His
sure-fire recipe:
one drop tabasco, salt, vinegar,
close your eyes and slurp.
That's that. I did it without wincing, proved
whatever yet remained untesting.

Martha M. Vertreace

Reprinted from Second House from the Corner, Kennedy-King College, 1986.

Writing Assignment

Directions:
Assume that you are an art dealer who earns a living by selling pictures to people who are art collectors. Your customer has been to your shop, has seen the picture represented by your postcard, and has decided whether or not to buy the painting. Your job is to write a letter to that person, explaining why he or she should buy that painting. Your letter should remind your customer of what the painting looked like. After all, your customer has probably been to many galleries. Try to emphasize the good points of the art work. Make suggestions about where the customer could hang the picture. Remember -- your commission depends on sales, so you must try to sell the painting even if you hate it.

LOOK!
Spend a few minutes simply looking intently at the picture you have. What colors seem dominant? What emotion is suggested? Is there a story told in the word?

THINK!
Jot down words and phrases which come to you. Do not worry about word order, punctuation, spelling, or grammar. Write as quickly as you can.

WRITE!
Compose a letter one or two paragraphs long. Use the ideas you jotted down previously, and any others which may occur to you. Remember who your audience is, a busy person who does have a lot of money to spend, but not a lot of time to spend reading long, rambling letters. When you have completed your letter, be sure to proofread.

Writing Assignment: Dialogue

Directions:
Each of your painting postcards shows two people talking together. None of your postcards show the same two people. Look carefully at the painting:

Who are the two people?
What are their names?
What is their relationship?
What are they talking about?
Is there conflict involved?

Freewrite for five minutes, letting the ideas flow. Do not reject anything that comes. Do not worry about grammar, punctuation, or spelling at this point.

Write a page of dialogue spoken by the two people. Let the general subject evolve as the dialogue continues. Allow the dialogue to reflect the differences between the two people. Try to incorporate details about the painting itself into the dialogue. The painting shows you the setting where this dialogue takes place.

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English

Writing Experience

Directions:

You are an explorer, sent to experience the two countries whose music you just heard. No one else has ever visited these countries. Queen Isosceles funds all your travels and expects a full, written report comparing and contrasting these countries. She is primarily interested in the following:

1. What is the name of each country?
2. What is the terrain like in each country?
3. What clothing do adult men and women wear in each country?
4. What is the climate like in each country?
5. What kind of food do people eat in each country?

First:
Freewrite for five minutes about each country. Let the music suggest ideas and pictures to you. Jot down your thoughts as they occur. Do not worry, at this point, about correctness. Concentrate on simply getting ideas on paper.

Next:
Write a letter to Queen Isosceles comparing and contrasting each country. Use rich detail so that the queen can experience each country through your words.

Then:
Proofread your letter. Make sure you use the form of a business letter. Check to see that all your sentences are complete, all end punctuation in place.

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